

The Sacraments: Who Exactly Has Them—And What Exactly Do They Have?

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Introduction

“Do the Reformed have the Sacrament?” When the request came for a paper with that title, I tried to ignore it. In the first place, that kind of question has been categorized by some theologians as bordering on the *curiosae questiones* and, as such, perhaps unworthy of your valuable time. Second, I share with you the urge toward self-preservation. Seminary graduates usually remember well that when the subject came up in the classroom it was something akin to declaring open season on the professor. Third, the prospect of dealing with a subject only to conclude that there is no firm or unanimously agreed on answer is not particularly pleasant. As you may know, some fine Lutheran dogmaticians (e.g., Johann Fecht and Johann Dannhauer¹) held that the Reformed do retain the Lord’s Supper, while the strong majority of Lutheran teachers have maintained that the Reformed do not.

Eventually, of course, I accepted the assignment and now stand before you. More than the winsome persuasiveness of your Program Committee is involved here. I am thinking of the theme of your conference, *For the Forgiveness of Sins*. In the preface to his *Comprehensive Explanation of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper*, Johann Gerhard wrote: “First of all, God the Lord established the holy Sacraments so that they should be blessed means through which forgiveness of sins and other heavenly benefits are placed before us.”² That is why we were given the Sacraments and why a solid understanding of them is to be retained among us. A paper like this, despite its limitations and potential sources of discomfort, can serve that purpose. With that in mind the original title has been expanded somewhat to allow at least a brief examination of what we have in the Sacraments. We have no desire to overlook the more important while giving attention to matters of some importance.

The chosen material in this paper has been organized into three main parts, each with several subparts. The three major divisions are these:

1. Our Traditional Position Stated and Illustrated;
2. Clarifications and Cautions concerning our Traditional Position; and
3. Blessings and Encouragements appropriate for our Traditional Position

Before we launch into the study proper, allow this word of clarification regarding “the Sacraments.” As is commonly known, the term Sacrament and the manner in which the term is defined reflect ecclesiastical use more than biblical mandate. Scripture does not contain the term Sacrament nor does it designate Baptism and the Lord’s Supper by any common name. Ideally, churches would define the word identically and would apply the word to church rites consistently and accurately. But we live in a world that is far from ideal in this, so confusion and misleading emphases prevail. We have no authority to insist that different church bodies use our definition of a Sacrament. We can merely maintain clarity in our definition of the term and seek to explain why we have found that definition particularly suitable. We have chosen to limit the term Sacrament to those two rites that are almost universally recognized as special because of visible signs that are a part of them and special promises the New Testament attaches to them. In this way the following familiar definition of the Sacraments

¹ These two are mentioned by Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, III, p. 371.

² Johann Gerhard, *A Comprehensive Explanation of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper*, I, p. 1.

came to be used: Sacraments are those rites, instituted by God, which employ an “earthly element” connected with the word of God and which convey and seal grace to the recipient.

For a time Lutheran theologians were willing to include absolution in the list of Sacraments (Cf. the *Apology*, Art. XII and XIII). Once the presence of a divinely commanded external element or sign was more consistently included in the definition of a Sacrament, however, our fathers have been quite consistent in limiting the term to Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. To state what is perhaps by this time self-evident, this paper concerns itself only with these two sacred rites.

Part 1: Our Traditional Position Stated and Illustrated

What makes a Sacrament?

What precisely makes a rite an *authentic* Sacrament? That is, what must be there for us to acknowledge the presence of a *valid* Sacrament? A common and accurate answer found among us is “God’s word and the element(s).” There is seldom debate on what elements are meant, so no discussion on that point is included at this time.³ But what exactly is meant by the “word of God” that is here linked to the element? While this may seem like a silly question, it is one that must be asked with seriousness and answered with accuracy. Our understanding of the “word of God” that is joined to the water, bread, and wine will determine if and when we consider an ecclesiastical action a true Sacrament.

What is the Word of God?

The first observation that our Lutheran fathers have repeatedly made is that God’s word is not simply to be equated with the sounds and syllables drawn from the biblical text. Rather, the word of God is essentially the divine truths or thoughts conveyed to us through human speech or language. Robert Preus comments on the distinction between these aspects of Scripture:

According to Lutheran theology, the *materia* of Scripture is the letters, syllables, words, and phrases that together constitute Scripture. . . . The *forma* of Scripture is its inspired meaning, the thoughts of God concerning our salvation and divine mysteries, . . . thoughts that God revealed to us in time and communicated to us in Sacred Scripture. Considered according to its *materia*, Scripture is the Word of God only in a secondary and inappropriate sense, inasmuch as it is only the vehicle that brings the thoughts of God to us. It is the *forma* of Scripture, the inspired meaning, that makes Scripture what it is—the Word of God—and distinguishes it from all other books. The dogmaticians, therefore, when they speak of Scripture as the Word of God, are thinking primarily of the divine intention and meaning, the inspired content, of Scripture.⁴

This distinction between the *forma* (essence) and *materia* (external form) of Scripture is important to keep in mind while asking what is joined to the elements to create Sacraments.⁵ The outward forms and sounds of the Bible text, including the grammatical constructions (*materia Scripturae*) are to serve as vehicles for the divine truth, the sense and thought God is communicating to us (*forma Scripturae*). When that does not happen we may have correct-sounding words, even biblical words and phrases, that nevertheless are empty of God’s word. Illustrative examples of this would be references to “Our Father in heaven” when used in the setting of a

³ Questions and debate about the Sacramental elements are a part of church history. The question of whether liquids other than water are permissible in Baptism has been asked. Regarding the Lord’s Supper, of course, questions have more frequently been asked, e.g., whether leavened or unleavened bread should be used or whether grape wine should be used to the exclusion of grape juice or wines made from other fruits or plants. Our limited time and purpose prohibit us from including these issues in this paper. Let it suffice to say we acknowledge bread (with or without yeast) and “fruit of the grape vine” (normally fermented but not absolutely excluding unfermented) as the proper elements for the Lord’s Supper.

⁴ Robert Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, I, p.267.

⁵ While beyond our point of discussion here, we must also remember that in some ways the *forma* and *materia* of Scripture cannot be separated. Both are equally inspired when the reference is to the external form of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures.

false fraternal organization, the use of the divine name “Jehovah” when used at a Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, or the use of the Trinitarian formula among the Mormons or Unitarians. In these instances, while the outward form and vocabulary of Scripture may be used and clearly recognizable, the meaning and sense is utterly foreign to Scripture and is for that reason no longer God’s Word.

The application of this principle to the matter of discerning the presence of a valid Sacrament is perhaps obvious. Any religious group that denies the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity does not have Christian Baptism even if they should apply water “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The correct vocabulary and sounds are all there, but the definitions attached to those words and the consistently maintained meaning of the phrase is simply not what God has communicated in Scripture. The essential word of God is absent, is not joined to the element, and so no valid Sacrament exists. Also, when the Reformed churches introduce the distribution of bread and wine in their worship assemblies with reference to Christ’s words, “This is my body; this is my blood,” they admittedly have the correct vocabulary and sounds drawn directly from the biblical text. But over 450 years of ecclesiastical history testify at the same time that those same churches have attached fully different meanings to the words and intend to say something that is not at all the sense or meaning Christ communicated in the upper room on the eve of his crucifixion. Hence the great majority of our fathers concluded that the Reformed do not possess a valid Sacrament of the Altar. This was the point made in the Formula of Concord, when these words of Luther were quoted:

In the same manner I also speak and confess (he says) concerning the Sacrament of the Altar, that there the body and blood of Christ are in truth orally eaten and drunk in the bread and wine, even though the priests [ministers] who administer it [the Lord’s Supper], or those who receive it, should not believe or otherwise misuse it. For it does not depend upon the faith or unbelief of men, but upon God’s Word and ordinance, *unless they first change God’s Word and ordinance and interpret it otherwise*, as the enemies of the Sacrament do at the present day, who, of course, have nothing but bread and wine; *for they also do not have the words and appointed ordinance of God, but have perverted and changed them according to their own [false] notion.*⁶

This citation from the Formula of Concord may also serve to remind us of another important distinction in identifying the word of God in valid Sacramental use. Notice that Luther distinguished between disbelieving God’s word and changing God’s word. A refusal to trust God’s words, in itself, does not change or remove the word of God, but a reinterpreting of God’s words does. Unbelief does not remove the thoughts or truths God is conveying. Rather, it despises and rejects what God is saying. When different meanings are imported and attached to the words, however, the thoughts and truths of God are thrust out. This distinction needs to be kept in mind if we are to understand why our Lutheran theologians spoke and wrote the way they did on this subject.

Word of Institution vs Word of Promise

Another way to state this point is to distinguish between the *command* of God in instituting the Sacraments and the gracious *promises* God attaches to our use of the Sacraments. Both the commands and promises are properly spoken of as “God’s word,” as Johann Gerhard indicates in this definition of a Sacrament:

We say therefore that for a sacrament properly so called two things are especially required, namely, the word and the element, according to that common saying of Augustine: “*Accedit verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*” (The word comes to the element and it becomes a Sacrament.) By “word” is first understood the command and divine institution, by which the element . . . is set apart from common use and appointed for sacramental use; then the promise, the one indeed peculiar to the gospel, to be applied and sealed through the sacrament.⁷

⁶ Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, VII, 32, *Triglott* p. 983, with italics added. Most scholars agree that the phrase “interpret it otherwise” is in apposition to “change God’s Word and ordinance.”

⁷ Quoted by Adolph Hoenecke, *Dogmatik*, IV, p. 49.

For the purpose of determining a valid Sacrament, however, a distinction between God's instituting word and his promising word can be (and has been) made. Were we to use an equation to denote what makes a valid Sacrament, which of the two following formulas would we choose?

Divine word of command + word of promise + element = Sacrament
Divine word of command + element = Sacrament that has word of promise

Discussions about the validity of sacramental action in various churches show the importance of clarifying this point. Our church fathers have normally taken the position reflected in the second of the two equations. In other words, they speak of the necessity of the divine word of command to be present and unchanged to establish a Sacrament that really exists, but do not require that the divine word of promise be rightly appreciated or kept intact for the validity to prevail. This is not the same as saying the word of promise is unimportant, simply that it is not essential for a true Sacrament to exist. To use phrases that can be found in Lutheran literature on the subject, a useful distinction can be made between a *valid* Sacrament (one that really exists) and a *legitimate* Sacrament (one used for the right reasons and to accomplish God's revealed purposes). If God's word of institution or command is changed or supplanted, no Sacrament remains. The essence of the Sacrament is removed. But if God's word of promise is despised and changed in meaning, only the intended blessing or benefit is forfeited, not the Sacrament itself. In this way the distinction is made between the essence and the efficacy of a Sacrament, between a valid use and a fitting use of a Sacrament. One may possess a Sacrament yet forfeit its blessings by an inappropriate use of it.

Some Illustrations

A couple of examples may illustrate the principle involved. When a Baptism is performed in a Reformed or an Evangelical church, they use the Trinitarian formula without reinterpreting the content of the words. They formally embrace Christ's deity and subscribe to the doctrine of the Triune God as revealed in Scripture. They formally subscribe to the fact that they are applying the water on the authority and by the command of the true God and in connection with his revelation of himself (his name). We therefore judge that they possess and use the divine word of command and, because they use it with water as commanded, we grant that they possess an authentic Sacrament. At the same time we are aware that they do not treat God's word of promise attached to Baptism with the same respect or appreciation. In their denial of the existence of any real means of grace (in the sense that God actually channels gifts of grace through them), they consider Baptism to be a mere outward sign of an immediate grace of God. So the way they use Baptism is thus inappropriate and to be lamented, since it involves a denial of clear Bible testimony and assurances that Baptism is a tool God uses to give or strengthen faith. Still, we do not deny that they possess true Christian Baptism, for their reinterpretation of the divine promises does not in itself remove the Sacrament from their presence.

But now let us consider an observance of the Lord's Supper in that same Reformed or Evangelical church. When they distribute the bread and wine, they normally use all or part of the words, "Take and eat, this is my body" and "Take and drink, this is my blood" as originally voiced by Christ in the upper room. While phraseology in consecration and distribution may vary, those receiving the Sacramental elements are invariably pointed to Christ's instituting word of command and urged to make a connection between what he did and what they are doing. Externally, everything seems to be in place for a valid Sacrament, even as described in the following words from the Lutheran Confessions:

For the true and almighty words of Jesus Christ which He spake at the first institution were efficacious not only at the first Supper, but they endure, are valid, operate, and are still efficacious [their force, power, and efficacy endure and avail even to the present], so that in all places where the Supper is celebrated according to the institution of Christ, and His words are used, the body and blood of Christ are truly present, distributed, and received, because of the

power and efficacy of the words which Christ spake at the first Supper. For where His institution is observed and His words are spoken over the bread and cup [wine], and the consecrated bread and cup [wine] are distributed, Christ Himself, through the spoken words, is still efficacious *by virtue of the first institution*, through His word, which He wishes to be there repeated.⁸

More, however, should be said, just as more had already been said in the same Article of the Confession (Paragraph 32, page 983; quoted above, page 3). Since they formally and consistently deny what Christ's instituting word of command is saying, namely, that he is giving us and we are to eat and drink his body and blood together with the bread and wine, the Reformed or Evangelicals are changing the rite into something wholly different. Despite Christ's words, they consider the imparting of Christ's real and true body and blood to be impossible as well as unnecessary. By assigning a different meaning to Christ's utterance they tamper with the word of command and lose the essence of the Sacrament. Then, with regard to the word of promise attached to the Lord's Supper, they persistently deny that the external rite in itself is a divine instrument to convey grace and see it only as an outward sign, a memorial meal that points the believer back to Christ's death. Despite well-crafted confessions that strive to cloak the truth, the Reformed community still echoes the sentiment expressed by Zwingli to Charles V: "The Sacraments are so far from conferring grace that they also cannot bring or dispense it."⁹

Synodical Conference Position

In a 1933 article P. E. Kretzmann surveyed the most prominent confessional statements of Reformed church bodies from the 16th century to the early 20th century and then, in view of those statements, asked to what extent we might acknowledge the validity of the Sacraments as administered by them. His answer was clear and, to the best of this writer's knowledge, indicative of the stance taken by virtually all prominent writers in the Synodical Conference and presumably espoused by those in the WELS, ELS, and LCMS.

It is true that all the denominations concerned, with the exception of the Episcopalians, have the false conception of the doctrine of Holy Baptism [i.e., they deny it is a means of grace]; but they accept the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, and they use the baptismal formula prescribed by the words of the institution. For that reason, all other things being equal, we recognize the validity of Holy Baptism administered in the Reformed denominations. The exceptions are those which show Modernism rampant, with a denial of the vicarious atonement and the Trinity as revealed in the Word of God. . . . In other words, in Holy Baptism the Reformed churches deny the *efficacy*, but not the *essence*. —On the other hand, in the Lord's Supper we have definite spiritual values (the real or sacramental presence of Christ's body and blood) connected with definite earthly elements (in, with, and under the bread and wine); hence the repudiation of this fact, together with the denial of the heavenly content, means the loss of the whole Sacrament. For in the case of the Eucharist the Reformed denominations connect an entirely wrong conception with the words of institution, by the false doctrine which they have taken pains to express in their confessions, the result being equivalent to a denial of the institution of Christ. The Reformed churches, in this instance, deny *both* the *essence* and the *efficacy* of the Sacrament. Hence one of the former presidents of Synod said, in a fine epigrammatic saying made years ago, "If we discount transubstantiation, the Catholics have at least half a Sacrament; but the Reformed Churches have lost the Eucharist."¹⁰

⁸ Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, VII, 75, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 998.

⁹ Ulrich Zwingli, *Fidei Ratio*, cited by Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions*, p. 181. In fairness it must be said that later Reformed confessional statements distanced themselves from Zwingli's words in many respects. But the changes in wording never abandoned or repudiated the conviction that the Sacrament is at best a visible sign of an invisible grace that is imparted by the Spirit independent of (although possibly simultaneous with) the distribution of the Sacrament.

¹⁰ P.E. Kretzmann, "The Validity of the Sacraments in Reformed Church-Bodies," *CTM*, Vol. 4 (1933), No. 10, p 735.

Another Requirement for a Sacrament

Yet another necessary item should be mentioned that is a requisite for a valid Sacrament, namely, its **use** according to Christ's will and command. Again, the Formula of Concord has addressed this issue quite adequately and this testimony merits repetition, to remind us that there are occasions when we would deny that the Roman Catholics possess the Eucharist as well.

This blessing, or the recitation of the words of institution of Christ alone does not make a Sacrament if the entire action of the Supper, as it was instituted by Christ, is not observed (as when the consecrated bread is not distributed, received, and partaken of, but is enclosed, sacrificed, or carried about), but the command of Christ, *This do* (which embraces the entire action or administration in this Sacrament, that in an assembly of Christians bread and wine are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, drunk, and the Lord's death is shown forth at the same time) must be observed unseparated and inviolate, as also St. Paul places before our eyes the entire action of the breaking of bread or of distribution and reception, 1 Co 10, 16. [Let us now come also to the second point, of which mention was made a little before.] To preserve this true Christian doctrine concerning the Holy Supper, and to avoid and abolish manifold idolatrous abuses and perversions of this testament, the following useful rule and standard has been derived from the words of institution: *Nihil habet rationem Sacramenti extra usum a Christo institutum* ("Nothing has the nature of a Sacrament apart from the use instituted by Christ") or *extra actionem divinitus institutam* ("apart from the action divinely instituted"). That is: If the institution of Christ be not observed as He appointed it, there is no Sacrament. This is by no means to be rejected, but can and should be urged and maintained with profit in the Church of God. And the use or action here does not mean chiefly faith, neither the oral participation only, but the entire external, visible action of the Lord's Supper instituted by Christ, [to this indeed is required] the *consecration*, or words of institution, the *distribution* and *reception*, or oral partaking [manducation] of the consecrated bread and wine, [likewise the partaking] of the body and blood of Christ. And apart from this use, when in the papistic mass the bread is not distributed, but offered up or enclosed, borne about, and exhibited for adoration, it is to be regarded as no Sacrament; just as the water of baptism, when used to consecrate bells or to cure leprosy, or otherwise exhibited for worship, is no Sacrament or baptism. For against such papistic abuses this rule has been set up at the beginning [of the reviving Gospel], and has been explained by Dr. Luther.¹¹

Concluding Summary

To summarize the points made in this section, our tradition position is that we maintain the following: Whoever has the instituting word of God with the element(s) and uses them according to Christ's command has the particular Sacrament instituted by that word. Conversely, we also hold that whoever changes or replaces the divine word of command, omits the element, or departs from the appointed use does not possess the particular Sacrament instituted by Christ through that word.

Part 2: Clarifications and Cautions concerning our Traditional Position

Questions Continue

To formulate, publish, and affirm statements to indicate who has and who does not have the Sacraments has proven to be largely ineffective in ending discussions and apparent skepticism concerning our position.¹²

¹¹ Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, VI, 83-87, *Triglotta*, pp. 1000-1002.

¹² Questions recently addressed to the Question and Answer service offered through our WELS web site confirm the fact that certain kinds of questions about the Sacraments are as prevalent now as they were in the days of our fathers. Sample: "What elements and

Our task, therefore, is to identify reasons for this, reexamine what we believe in the light of Scripture, and offer loving response. The issues now mentioned are not designed to be exhaustive, but hopefully treat the most prominent and thought-worthy challenges we face in clarifying and maintaining our position.

Our Use of Deductive Conclusion

Since the Bible does not speak to this subject directly or explicitly, the formulation of our doctrine involves at least some logical deduction drawn from Bible statements. This is sometimes perceived as a weakness to our stance. Orthodox Lutheranism acknowledges that deductive conclusions in matters of doctrine are legitimate as long as they do not violate the laws of logic, do not in the slightest contradict what Scripture clearly says, have premises that are drawn from Scripture, and do not conclude something that is not implicit in the Scriptures. In the question we are now discussing, for example, the premise that the essence of God's Word is distinguishable from its external forms and sounds is demonstrable and compatible with Scripture.¹³ The ability and tendency of sinful beings to change and supplant the real word of God and end up with a sound-alike counterfeit message is also tragically true, as experience teaches (Genesis 3:4). Still, the conclusion that some have the divine words of sacramental institution and others do not gives some people pause. Even my relatively few years working with students in the classroom have impressed that fact on me. Perhaps it sounds presumptuous to make such bold statements in such important matters.

The remedy to this discomfort is to be found in patient instruction and assurances regarding the proper use of deductive reason in its ministerial role in relation to Scripture. It might be helpful, while discussing the Sacraments in general, to point out that our doctrine regarding infant baptism also a logical conclusion, drawn from a number of Bible statements, but not drawn by any explicit command to baptize children or babies. The same might be said of allowing women to attend Holy Communion, a practice we wholeheartedly endorse despite an absence of an express precedent or precept.

We Exercise Some Degree of Subjective Judgment

Near the end of his 1933 article on the validity of the Sacraments in the Reformed Church Bodies, P. E. Kretzmann mentioned that we generally acknowledge the validity of Holy Baptism among the Reformed, but quickly mentioned there were exceptions. "The exceptions are those [church bodies] which show Modernism rampant, with a denial of the vicarious atonement and the Trinity as revealed in the Word."¹⁴ Who would deny that skeptical rationalism, negative biblical criticism, the wholesale devaluation of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice, and related "modernistic" attitudes have long run "rampant" in a variety of nominally Christian church bodies? Might or should such church bodies be judged to have forfeited valid Sacraments? Many within Lutheranism have voiced the opinion that since the Church of Rome has long denied or in effect negated the centrality and significance of Christ's vicarious atonement, she has in a real sense ceased to acknowledge or honor the Triune God of our salvation. At what point do people cross the line that spells disqualification from the ranks of Christianity and thus forfeiture from possessing the Sacraments? Where do we draw the line in classifying a visible church that maintains a demonstrable possession of the marks of the church and an equally demonstrable rebellion against that which is at the heart of the gospel's meaning and thought? At the conclusion of the same article Professor Kretzmann wrote, "The Lutheran Church has hitherto charitably assumed favorable conditions in the administration of Holy Baptism by Reformed bodies. We trust that, to this extent at least, we may continue to have this confidence."¹⁵ These words admit that some degree of human appraisal, subjective judgment, is involved in applying the established principles.

benefits would the participants in the Reformed and Catholic versions of the Lord's Supper receive?" Indications are that the need and value of reviewing and discussing issues pertaining to the essence and benefits of the Sacraments remain real.

¹³ For the sake of brevity, we cite the following verifications of the principle stated: (1) The external forms of thought may be destroyed, but the Word itself endures forever (Jer 36:27; Ps 119:89); and (2) If sounds and essence were identical, no translations or paraphrases would be possible (Acts 2:8, 11).

¹⁴ P. E. Kretzmann, *op.cit.*, p. 735.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

In response to this concern, we readily acknowledge the difficulty that may face us when we strive to apply the principles contained in our position. We do well to ask, “Who is sufficient for such a task?” and then run to God and ask for adequate wisdom. But this is something different from jeopardizing our position as such. This concern has to do with applying the established principles, not the principles themselves. As in other important issues that face the Church Militant, let us cling to the principles firmly and seek wisdom in applying them properly.

We Ignore the Conviction of the Recipient

Some say our approach to the question as inappropriate because it deals only with a church’s public confession rather than with the meaning of Scripture embraced by the recipient of the Sacrament. Is it fair or accurate to say church members, who may personally cling to the truth of the Real Presence, lack a valid Sacrament because of a substantially different public confession made by their church? Will not God deal with such people according to their private confessions rather than their largely meaningless public confessions?

We acknowledge that our overall assumption is that the meaning attached to the words by the church bodies or at least the church leadership (generally administrators of a Sacrament) has primacy over any meaning the individual laypeople (generally recipients of a Sacrament) might have. Should a member of a Reformed church go to Communion at one of our Lutheran churches, we would uniformly say that the person is participating in a valid sacramental action and is receiving the Lord’s true body and blood in sacramental union with the elements. Yet if one of our Lutheran members for some reason goes to the Lord’s Supper at a Reformed church, we would say he did not participate in a valid Sacrament and received only bread and wine.

Our rationale can be stated this way: The presence (or absence) of the instituting word of God remains the determining issue. The word is either present or absent when elements are consecrated and Sacraments are administered, and this fact is distinguishable from the meaning a potential recipient may attach to the words spoken. For this reason the formal, official dogma prevails over the individual’s personal conviction in determining if the instituting word of God is present. The words of institution conveyed by the officiant(s) or administrator(s), or the group under whose auspices the instituting word is spoken (the particular local church or church body) takes precedence over the recipient’s private understanding of the word for this specific diagnostic purpose.

There’s the Danger of Emotional Involvement

It is often extremely difficult to render judgment in this area without at the same time confronting strong emotions. This is particularly true when we are dealing with other professing Christians. In the preface to his 1610 treatment of the Sacraments, Johann Gerhard acknowledged that “there has arisen much strife and fighting concerning both of these holy Sacraments among those who completely confess Christ and His Word.”¹⁶ It is never pleasant to have to identify and expose false teachings embraced by those who otherwise maintain a high view of Christ and Scripture. In the past and present, for example, it has grieved us to say that Reformed churches do not have the Lord’s Supper. We wish they did. And sometimes another set of emotions may intrude in our diagnosis of what church bodies have or don’t have. A recent question submitted to the *Question and Answer* online service offered through our WELS web site read, “Why do the WELS churches not rebaptize Catholics who have converted and joined a WELS congregation? Is there not something unholy about those being baptized in a religion that is headed by the Antichrist?” Righteous indignation can spill over into our dealing with the question at hand. Furthermore, the Satanic conversion of the Lord’s Supper into the blasphemous Sacrament of the Mass in the Church of Rome might also have been cited as an equally strong reason why many are tempted to classify the church of the Antichrist as one lacking the other Sacrament as well.

Here is the place to remind ourselves that the presence or absence of the divine word, and hence the Sacraments, does not depend on the piety or the impiety of those who administer them. The presence or absence

¹⁶ Johann Gerhard, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

of saving faith, the degree of correct versus incorrect understanding on the subject, and in general the extent that a church body may depart from other Bible teachings is not the issue here.¹⁷ In short, we dare not allow our appreciation for good qualities in some church bodies to blind us to grievous deficiencies in their midst, nor dare we let our holy hatred of churches who have largely apostatized blind us to truths the Spirit in his mercy has preserved among them. “Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.”

Now We Face Pluralism, Minimalism, and Purposeful Ambiguity

An increasingly frustrating problem faces us in applying the principles of our position. To ascertain if a religious group really possesses the Sacraments we must first determine if those involved have changed God’s Word and ordinance and interpret it contrary to Christ’s meaning. But what if a group opts not to take a definitive position on the meaning of a biblical text or openly encourages people to find and be content with any meaning or no particular meaning? What happens when creedal statements are openly treated as non-authoritative or of no great significance, even when there remains some formal allegiance to them? Should we continue to key off the formal creed in trying to determine if a group retains the instituting word of God, or should we lay it aside as no longer sufficient for this purpose? These and similar questions are asked because certain phenomena are apparently spreading through church bodies in epidemic proportions and call us to reexamine the way we do things.

The rise of what might be called an *approved pluralism* is one such influence to be noted. Usually linked to emphases and goals of a false ecumenism, a diversity of beliefs is not only tolerated within given church bodies, but also seen as a commendable strength. The endeavors of the ELCA in recent years are an example of this phenomenon that is well known to us. In 1997 the ELCA declared full altar fellowship with three Reformed church bodies: the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. Overtures for full expressions of church fellowship with the Episcopal Church and the Moravians are also a matter of public record in the ELCA. Furthermore, while the formal establishment of church fellowship relations with other church bodies is not being sought by the ELCA, most of its constituent congregations practice open communion and are comfortable with joint communion celebrations. The differences between Lutheran and Reformed beliefs in regard to the Lord’s Supper are generally considered of no great importance. Whatever understanding or convictions various church bodies – or various members of the church bodies – hold are considered equally acceptable or commendable. And whatever meaning one might attach to biblical words is reckoned no more or less valid than another held by a peer in the same group.

Accompanying the rise of this pluralism sanctioned at the highest level of church bodies is often a corresponding *minimalism* in the education of and expectation from the laity with regard to doctrinal issues. The differences in the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper that historically were sources of dissension between churches are either no longer mentioned or are downplayed to the point of becoming non-issues. Each church member is allowed if not encouraged to find his or her preferred stance in regard to what is distributed and received in the Eucharist. The overriding desire to permit diversity of belief and opinion for purposes of a false ecumenism is apparent.¹⁸

The artful and purposeful use of ambiguous language in confessional statements is nothing new. In contemporary ecumenical fervor, moreover, ambiguous terminology is as prevalent and prized as ever. During

¹⁷ When the early church wrestled with these issues, e.g., in by Cyprian’s dealing with the *lapsi* or Augustine’s debates with the Donatists, complicated arguments soon flourished as emotions ran high. We hold it to be an evidence of divine providence that such balanced and careful positions were ultimately taken by those we reckon to be orthodox in their conclusions.

¹⁸ The observations here cited are intended to make the point that the *official position and practice* of the church bodies is increasingly pluralistic and minimalistic. There are other aberrations from sound doctrine and practice that may be periodically observed in their churches and that serve as horrible examples of apostasy, but do not enjoy official sanction. The substituting of snack chips and soft drinks for the bread and wine in the Eucharist would be an example. The argument for dropping the traditional Trinitarian formula in favor of gender-neutral terms for God and muddled language in theological treatises concerning the Trinity would be other causes for our concern. A departure from the biblical doctrine and language of the Trinity does not currently have formal approval, only some level of toleration in various church bodies. Since the validity of Baptism is involved in this, we rightly express concern but do not at present deny that the Sacrament of Baptism remains among them.

the last couple of months this essayist spent time reading through the recently published *Reformed Confessions* by Jan Rohls.¹⁹ Concerning the questions if the Sacraments are really means of grace, and if Christ's body and blood are really present in the Lord's Supper, the confessional language among the Reformed over the past 450 years is fascinating. There is a conscious attempt to use language that echoes what we would call "Lutheran biblical" language. It is language that sounds identical or almost identical to Lutheran speech and meaning. However, alongside the carefully crafted wording remain the uniformly embraced Reformed presuppositions and meanings that render such a belief absurd and impossible. The often-vague language did not signal any departure from Reformed thought. Also within the past month I read through a number of statements posted on the official ELCA web site.²⁰ What I assume to be purposeful ambiguity is alive and well. What is not so clear, however, is a corresponding seriousness in preserving or clarifying doctrine that is distinctively Lutheran.

Since we seek to base our judgments on the official ecclesiastical statements and practice that prevail in a group where a Sacrament is administered, these contemporary trends must be reckoned with. Again, we speak of pluralism, minimalism, and intentional ambiguity as reflected *in the formal or prevailing doctrine and practice* of a church body. An almost unavoidable result of relativism is a reinforcement of the postmodern mindset that sees language itself as arbitrary and the meaning of language as relative. Postmodern thought largely denies any truly authoritative meaning other than what people within a certain group select for themselves. Texts, including biblical texts, are employed with the assumption that meaning is not located in the text itself, but that meaning and interpretation are formed in and flow from those who receive or interact with the text. In short, to find a distinct or consistent meaning that some church bodies attach to the instituting word of God is becoming an increasingly difficult task.

It may be suggested that, in some church bodies, this turn of events may signal an improvement of sorts. In groups where the Trinitarian formula carried a definite anti-Trinitarian meaning, or Christ's words regarding the real presence carried a meaning that denied the real presence, postmodernism can give church members a less biased environment to receive the word of God. Rather than being encumbered with authoritatively suggested wrong meanings to the biblical words, people are freer to receive the words themselves with the meaning that the Holy Spirit conveys through them. A veil of sorts is lifted from their minds. The truth inherent in the divine words themselves may fill the void created by the removal of predetermined but wrong meanings. So a case can be made that we use caution in assuming the prevalence of wrong meanings that signal the absence of God's essential Word.

In these observations, we mention that the impact is again on attempts to apply the principles inherent in our position, not on the soundness of the position itself.

A Final Word of Caution

Before concluding this section, a word of caution is in order. Put bluntly, the question whether or not the Reformed (or others) have valid Sacraments is, in a sense, not worth that much of our time and energy. I say this knowing that I risk being misunderstood in some way or another. I am not trying to be soft on error. I fully concur with Gerhard, who urges that "we also persistently uphold the pure doctrine of the Sacraments and zealously fight against every kind of falsification and perversion of the Sacraments' words of institution."²¹ My point is that Scripture never addresses the issue as such, nor does it indicate that such determination is all that crucial to carrying out more important tasks of serving the world with the Word of God. The study and discussion we participate in today does indeed have value, and this is primarily in the areas of hermeneutics, logic and comparative theology. It is also a good reminder of the importance of returning to principles drawn from Scripture and focusing primarily on them before we move to the arena of making applications. But it need

¹⁹ *Reformed Confessions, Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, by Jan Rohls. In sacramental issues, pp. 181-185, 211-218, and 2223-237 are particularly enlightening.

²⁰ Of particular interest for our present purposes was "The Use of the Means of Grace, A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament." "A Formula of Agreement" was also informative.

²¹ Johann Gerhard, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

not bother us too severely if, in the increasing non-creedal religious environment around us, we feel unable to give a definite appraisal of a particular situation.²²

It is a superior task to examine whether or not *we* possess and enjoy valid Sacraments and to recognize what we have in them. We will then be moved to share with others the truth about the Sacraments and their relation to the Gospel. This is the way that fosters truth. For these reasons the following section of our study focuses on what we, by God's abundant grace and mercy, really do possess in the Sacraments and how we ought to react to this.

Part 3: Blessings and Encouragements appropriate for our Traditional Position

By Grace, We Have the Sacraments

To the question whether we ourselves have valid Sacraments, we may thankfully answer in the affirmative. The true, triune God has graciously revealed himself to us in Scripture and has led us to acknowledge him as our saving God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we apply water to someone in God's name as Jesus Christ commanded, we do so acknowledging his self-revelation in the Bible. We have been led to keep the instituting word of God as given, in form and meaning. We hold that the divine words of command are present and effective for God's purposes.²³

Concerning the Lord's Supper, we also thank God that we have been guided to retain the meaning of Christ's instituting words and joyfully acknowledge the real presence of his body and blood with the elements. We have been trained to focus on the words of institution and clear, parallel references as the basis for our doctrine here. We note the context of the instituting event and the fact that the Supper may be regarded as Christ's solemn and unchangeable last will. We observe repeatedly how honest exegesis of the pertinent verses and the grammatical constructions always reveals the same awesome meaning of the Savior's words. And when confronted with objections that have to do with the ability of Christ's human body to be present sacramentally, we observe that a Christology based on Scripture reveals the full capability of the Lord to do what he promises and declares. And we distribute the indicated elements, bread and fruit of the vine, as we celebrate the Holy Supper. In sum, with humble gratitude mixed with awe, we affirm that we possess the authentic Lord's Supper.

In the Sacraments We Have Highest Blessings

Having the Sacraments, we have priceless treasures. An examination of everything the Bible says about Baptism and the Lord's Supper reveals that they are genuine means of grace, that is, instruments that exhibit, offer, give, and seal to us the forgiveness of sins, life, salvation, discipleship, sonship under God, and union with Christ. They create and strengthen saving faith. They are vehicles of the Gospel and differ from the saving Word only in form. Sometimes God deals sets the Gospel promise before us naked, in word only, and sometimes he clothes them with commanded rites that are endowed with the same promise of spiritual power. If we did not possess these treasures, we would be doomed to temporal and eternal poverty.

Outwardly he [God] deals with us through the oral word of the gospel and through material signs, that is, baptism and the Sacrament of the altar. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure or order the outward factors should and

²² Perhaps this is also an adequate response the fact that fairly prominent Lutherans who maintained, for example, that the Reformed still possess the Sacrament of the Altar. This writer is not able to grasp the rationale they followed, other than what appears to have been their conviction that the Word of God, when articulated, was able to override new meanings being attached to it. While we concur that the Holy Spirit is fully capable of doing this at all times, we must also add that he has not revealed in Scripture any promise that will always do so, nor has he given indication through the history of Christendom that he has made a point of always doing so.

²³ Perhaps here is the place to mention that using the Mt 28:19 formula for Baptism is the most fitting, simplest and safest practice. We would not automatically deny the validity of a baptism performed "in the name of Jesus" (Acts 2:38, 8:16, etc.) if the meaning of Mt 28 is confirmed in the context of the sacramental action. We hold that departing from the Trinitarian formula, however, would normally be poor pastoral practice, invites confusion and (even worse) doubt, and should therefore be avoided.

must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. God has determined to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward word and sign instituted by him, as he says in Luke 16:29, "Let them hear Moses and the prophets."²⁴

In speaking this way we are aware that it strikes some as a form of idolatry, the ascribing to created things that which is only to be sought from the Lord God. Therefore we clarify that we in no way wish to suggest that God is unable to perform his saving deeds without means, when and where he chooses. We simply declare that he has revealed to us his desire to use these means and directs us nowhere else to obtain faith and forgiveness. In what has become a classic exhortation to maintain balance in ascribing honor to the Sacraments, Chemnitz speaks to us:

The Sacraments are certainly not to be made equal to the Holy Spirit so that they are believed to confer grace in an equal and exactly the same way as the Holy Spirit himself. But should on that account nothing be ascribed to the Sacraments? Certainly that which the statements of Scripture attribute to the Sacraments. . . . But we must with care and concern be on our guard when we dispute about the power and efficacy of the Sacraments lest we take away from God the things which properly belong to the grace of the Father, the working of the Spirit, and the merit of the Son of God and transfer them to the Sacraments. For this would be the crime of idolatry. . . . Power or efficacy is ascribed to the Sacraments not because saving grace is to be sought in the Sacraments apart from or beside the merit of Christ, the mercy of the Father, the working of the Holy Spirit. But the Sacraments are instrumental causes in such a way that through these means or instruments the Father wants to show, give, and bestow his grace, the Son wants to communicate his merit to the believers And in the use of the Sacraments faith does not seek or look for any essential power or efficacy which inheres in the external elements themselves, but it seeks, lays hold of, and accepts the grace of the Father, the merit of the Son, and the working of the Spirit in the promise which is attached to the Sacrament.²⁵

Sacramental Blessings Require Faith

In the Sacraments we possess more than external signs or visible symbols that point us to a divine grace conveyed without means. They are means God uses to give us his grace. But these ordinances do not earn divine favor merely by the use. For spiritual benefits to be received and enjoyed, faith is a requisite—a requisite graciously supplied through the Sacraments themselves.

Of the Use of the Sacraments they teach that the Sacraments were ordained, not only to be marks of profession among men, but rather to be signs and testimonies of the will of God toward us, instituted to awaken and confirm faith in those who use them. Wherefore we must so use the Sacraments that faith be added to believe the promises which are offered and set forth through the Sacraments.

They therefore condemn those who teach that the Sacraments justify by the outward act, and who do not teach that, in the use of the Sacraments, faith which believes that sins are forgiven, is required.²⁶

The emphasis on the necessity of faith for a profitable use of the Sacraments is an important clarification for any Romanizing tendency that is concerned merely with the outward use of the sacred rites. Though the years more than a few Reformed writers have accused Lutherans of teaching an *ex opere operato* approach to the Sacraments despite our denials. May we never give them cause to perpetuate such a falsehood. Our

²⁴ Martin Luther, LW, 40:146

²⁵ Martin Chemnitz, quoted in Hoenecke, *Dogmatik*, IV, p. 61.

²⁶ Augsburg Confession,, XIII, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 49.

emphasis on the importance of the Sacraments does not stem from our seeing an operative power in the rites themselves. It flows from Gospel promises attached to Baptism and the Lord's Supper and from our joyful confidence in the Lord God who comes to us through them. This attitude is perhaps nowhere better expressed than by Luther in his *Large Catechism* exposition regarding infant baptism:

We say that we are not so much concerned to know whether the person baptized believes or not; for on that account Baptism does not become invalid; but everything depends upon the Word and command of God. This now is perhaps somewhat acute, but it rests entirely upon what I have said, that Baptism is nothing else than water and the Word of God in and with each other, that is, when the Word is added to the water, Baptism is valid, even though faith be wanting. For my faith does not make Baptism, but receives it. Now, Baptism does not become invalid even though it be wrongly received or employed; since it is not bound (as stated) to our faith, but to the Word.²⁷

Similarly, while we appropriately stress the fact that we eat and drink the Lord's true body and blood in the Lord's Supper, we do not stop there in enumerating blessings received. Lutherans never have looked only to the oral reception of Christ's body and blood for sacramental bounty. Luther clarified this point in his day:

Have you ever heard from us that we eat Christ's supper, or teach that it should be eaten, in such a way that there is only an outward, physical eating of the body of Christ? Have we not taught in many books that in the Supper two things are to be kept in mind? One, which is the supreme and most necessary point, consisting of the words, "Take, eat, This is my body," etc.; the other is the Sacrament or physical eating of the body of Christ. Now, of course, no one can drive these words through the throat into the stomach, but he must take them to heart through the ears. But what does he take to heart through these words? Nothing else than what they say, viz., "the body which was given for us," which is the spiritual eating. We have said, further, that if anyone physically eats the Sacrament without these words or without this spiritual eating, it is not only of no avail to him, but even harmful, as Paul says (1 Co 11:27), "Whoever eats the bread in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body of the Lord."²⁸

Concluding Exhortations To Use the Sacraments Properly

The two-fold emphasis on spiritual and oral eating in the Eucharist will hopefully lead us to retain soundness of doctrine with regard to what we receive as well as how we properly receive it. Appropriate attitude coupled with action, of course, is always involved. St. Paul's warnings in 1 Corinthians 11 should be seen as most appropriate for us. Excellent exegetical studies of that portion of Scripture haven been produced and provided for our edification, and the reader is urged to give attention to them.²⁹

²⁷ Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, Of Infant Baptism, 52-53, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 745.

²⁸ Martin Luther, LW, 37:86. Perhaps it is worth mentioning here that a prominent reason given by the Reformed for their rejection of any oral eating of Christ's body and blood is that such an eating is *unimportant* as well as impossible. *Only* the spiritual eating is important, they say. They thus accuse us of stressing something that is unworthy of emphasis. While we concur in the importance of spiritual, we also hold it is not for us to say the oral eating is unimportant or unnecessary. We leave it to God to make such a statement, and he has revealed nothing at all that would indicate he desires to do so. We are charged to be faithful to his written Word, and that alone makes it incumbent on us to teach the oral eating as well as the spiritual eating. Though it might sound strange, we would not deny that the Reformed may derive some benefit from their non-sacramental eating and drinking of the bread and wine. As a mere memorial meal, such an action may convey divine truth (the essence of God's word), just as divine thoughts may be conveyed by a variety of symbols. Any blessings thus derived in no way excuse their mistreatment of God's word or diminish its seriousness. They end up receiving blessing and judgment at the same time.

²⁹ What quickly comes to mind are two studies included in Volume II of *The Wauwatosa Theology*: "Self-Examination, According to 1 Corinthians 11:28," by John Schaller; and "God's Judgment upon the Unworthy Use of the Lord's Supper, 1 Corinthians 11; 10:14-22," by August Pieper.

Despite our present limitations of time, we can at least quickly acknowledge the serious nature of devaluing the Lord's Supper and thus eating and drinking "in an unworthy manner" (not as an "unworthy person"). Let us beware of demeaning the body and blood of Christ in our conduct as the Corinthians were thoughtlessly doing. Let us also ask God to keep us from eating and drinking judgment (not damnation) to ourselves by not recognizing or discerning the Lord's body. Failure to discern the Lord's body would certainly include a rationalistic denial that the body and blood of Christ are really offered here, but also could involve a failure to recognize that they are "given and poured out for you" and that God is in earnest in affirming full and free pardon through them.³⁰

To grasp the full import of the *διακρίνειν*, we must add to the "properly judging and recognizing its essence and purpose" also this, that it be *highly esteemed* and kept holy in the heart as a means of imparting salvation

And what is that discerning? It is to *recognize and believe in* that body as the divine pledge for our state of grace before God, a pledge obtained through the death of the eternal Son of God and offered to us in the Sacrament for eating and drinking.³¹

Clearly, the New Testament calls us to enjoy and cherish Baptism and the Lord's Supper as we use them. The Scripture also uses the most vigorous kind of language to warn us against mistreating the holy Supper or approaching it in inappropriate manner. The reason for both these emphases should be self-evident: The Sacraments are and will remain among the choicest of blessings God has given to us. With the spoken and written Gospel, these sacred rites enrich us beyond measure. Let us conclude with that glorious thought and thank God for the opportunity to devote time to this topic. What was stated at the start of this presentation as a primary reason for giving attention to the Sacraments should remain prominent among us. They were given and endure among us "for the forgiveness of sins."

³⁰ The question has been asked, "How can we accuse the Reformed of eating and drinking to their judgment by not discerning the Lord's body when we deny that the Lord's body is even present in their pseudo-Sacrament?" In context, Paul is not speaking of those who partake where the instituting word is changed, so the passage really does not apply directly to what the Reformed are doing in their own circles. It would apply directly, however, if someone who shares the Reformed belief communes at a Lutheran altar. The same points might be made in regard to "sinning against the Lord's body and blood" by partaking in an unworthy manner. This in no way minimizes the error of those who change the instituting word in their denial of what Christ promises and declares. It merely identifies it as a sin different from the one Paul had in mind and observed among the Corinthians. It is perhaps of value to note that both Professor Schaller and Pieper, in the essays cited previously, never identify the more modern sin of denying the real presence with what Paul was referring to in 1 Corinthians 11.

³¹ August Pieper, *ibid.*, pp. 381, 390.

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